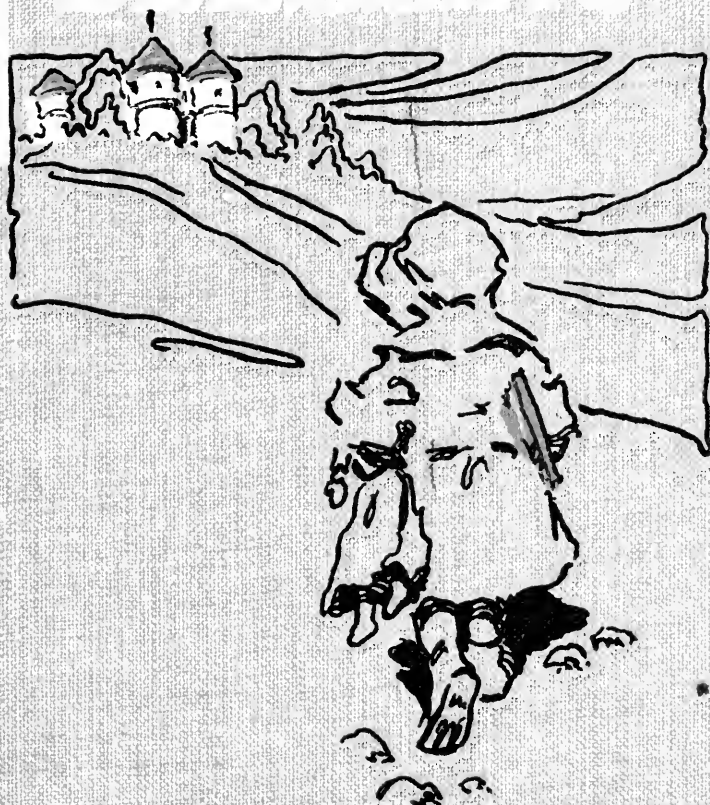


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THE QUEST OF A LITTLE BLESSING

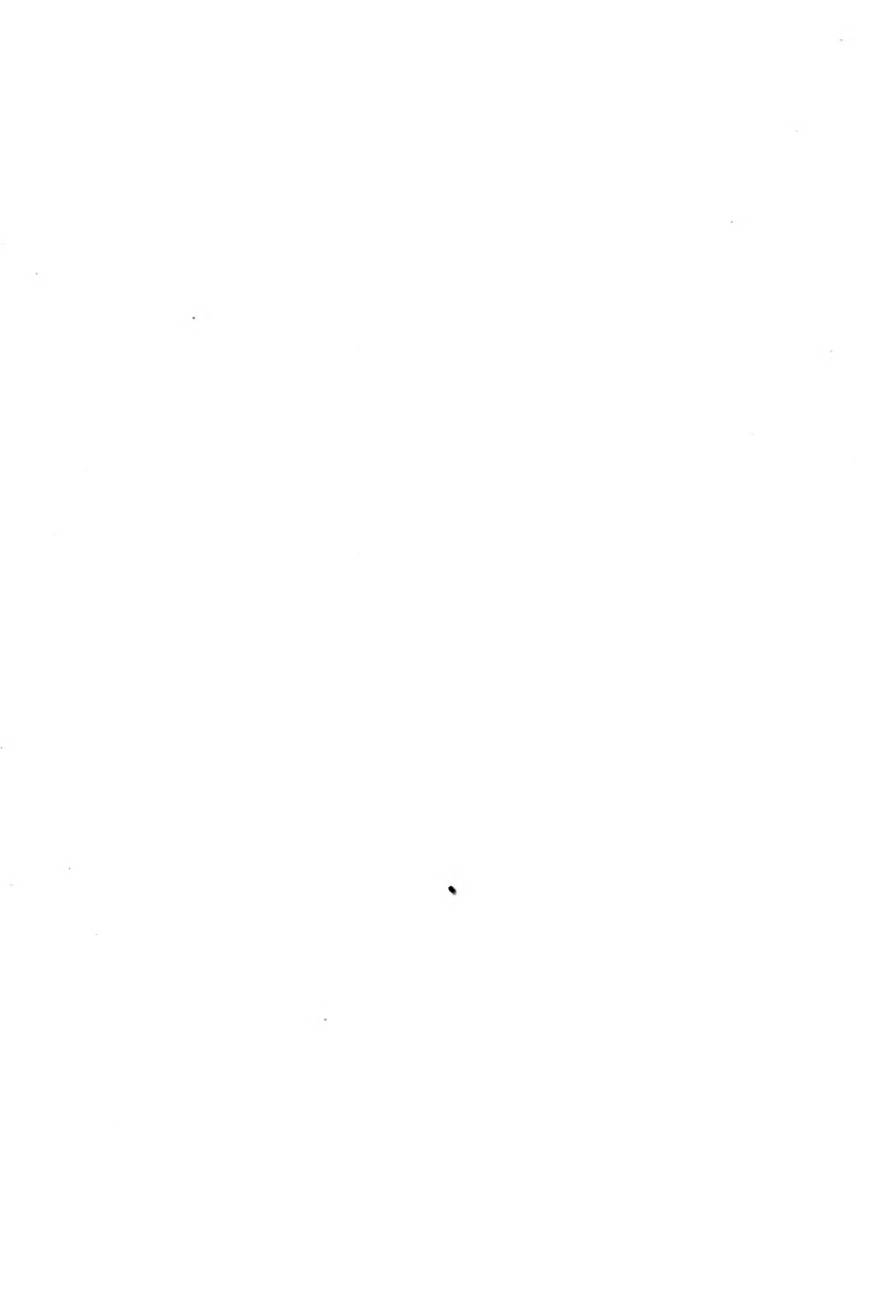


ANNA T. CLARK



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THE QUEST
of
“LITTLE BLESSING”

By

ANNA TAGGART CLARK

Cover Design and Illustrations by Howard Willard
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CHAPTER I.

THE BABY ARRIVES

"Birth, through whose agonies alone women are admitted to the greatly honorable society of Mothers, brings the children, whose ways and speech afford all their signs and passwords after the great initiation."—*Owen Peabody*.



THE good time had begun for both Mama and Rosemary, for a new baby was coming to the Sherwood home soon, and Mama told Rosemary the wonderful news.

Rosemary, being eleven, was old enough to help, and worked with Mama out of school hours, sewing lace and embroidery together to make all sorts of lovely and useful things. While they tied the dainty, soft blue comfort with pink and embroidered the carriage afghan cross-stitch, they visited softly (for shy Rosemary would sometimes talk freely to Mama alone), on this order.

"If I pray for a sister mornings besides when I go to bed, maybe (just maybe, you



know), maybe won't God send me one this time? And I put all my dolls away 'cause I'll never want a doll when my baby gets here." Or else she would whisper, "I'm praying regular, Mama, dear. It's a job to remember it mornings too, but you see I only prayed nights for a sister before the boys came (Rosemary was possessed of two mischievous brothers of eight and five years), and either it wasn't praying enough or else maybe there wasn't girls enough to go round and we had to take boys."

"Why Rosemary Sherwood, how you talk! Don't you love your brothers? Think what sweet babies they were!"

"Yes'm," and Rosemary was hugging Mama. "But think of a baby girl with curls for a change, that liked dolls and could sleep with me! You won't have to bother with her at all, and don't you worry a mite if she happens to come some day when you're away or busy. I'll be here, and I'll take all the care of her."

And so it happened that whether it was the extra praying in the morning, or because there were this time enough girls to go around, that the tiny baby who came into the Sherwood household to stay, a few weeks later, was a girl, and Rosemary's tongue was

now unloosed forever on that enchanting topic, "my baby sister."

Such a cooing, laughing little soul as the weeks grew into months. Papa went around singing, "Hang up the baby's stocking," as Christmas grew near. Mama made no secret of being radiantly happy. Rosemary had nothing left in life to desire, and the two boys, Frank and Paul, had intervals of forgetting to pound each other, and stood on their respective heads for the baby's admiration so long that Mama was afraid of serious results.

As for the rattles, bone and rubber rings, and brownie dolls in the fat stocking on Christmas morning, they were too many to tell. Blessing (for so they called her as a dear pet name instead of her own rightful one of Margaret), liked best a big blue and white leather ball soft and nice, and would point her small finger at it, creep after it, and try in vain to stuff it into her mouth, and would roll it back and forward to one of the boys for half an hour at a time.

Rosemary's dolls soon came back when she found out how they amused the baby as she grew larger, and Mama Sherwood watched the performance with delight. The boys seated or lying on rugs in front of the grate were wrapped in admiration for Rosemary's



talent in inventing new and surprising things for the dolls to do.

Sometimes the older child's imagination ran riot, and the little dolls, Daisy, Winifred, Peggy and Julia were stolen by gypsies or blown up by explosions, Blessing being the most interested spectator during these performances. Breathlessly awaiting their probable fate, and pretending to cry with them, she would laugh and clap her fat hands when rescuing parties arrived and they would all make merry celebrating the joyful climax.

Later on when Blessing talked, she invented some new term of endearment for each member of the family almost every day. With five persons watching each move, and five tongues ready to tell it all, it was indeed strange that the little soul was not badly spoiled; but her nature seemed to be impervious to such influences, and she was always the same; radiant and lovable, generous and helpful, so far as her baby strength permitted.

Mr. Sherwood, a lawyer in comfortable circumstances, had his office in New York City, but his home in Vinton, fifty miles out. He, as well as his wife, being heir intellectually and morally of a long line of honorable and distinguished ancestry, took Blessing for granted as a natural sequence.

"She couldn't be anything else!" he said when the boys were complaining of Blessing's liberality, since the baby had become alarmingly fond of giving away her own toys and those of the other children if not watched. "Then why are the boys so selfish?" said Mrs. Sherwood, quickly. "They have the same blood in them."

"Thrift, my dear," replied her husband. "In a girl or woman you would call it economy and laud it to the skies."

"Well," said Paul, "I don't care if she is our baby she can just let my stuff alone. I'll lick that Jones boy if he don't give back my tops she gave him yesterday."

Frank added, "that aint any worse than giving my knife to the milkman. She did that, and I got it back, but Blessing only laughed."

CHAPTER II.

A DOUBTFUL MOTHER

"Never comes mortal utterance so near to eternity as when a child utters words of loving praise to a Mother. Every syllable drops into the jewel box of her memory, to be treasured for ever and ever."

—*George B. Lyon.*

WHEN a baby talks the Angels stop and listen, the golden harps are hushed for a moment and God smiles, thinking of the things he used to say when on earth. Blessing's little heart was so full of love for everyone, especially "Mudder" as she called her, that her little tongue sang all day long.

"Poor little girl," said Mama one day when the baby hurt her finger. Blessing looked up in surprise, "Bessed (as she styled herself) isn't poor 'ittle dirl." Then apparently thinking of her richest possession and forgetting the hurt, she went around chanting, "Mudder, Mudder, dot a Mudder!" until Mrs. Sherwood felt almost overwhelmed by this adoration and wondered if she could live up to it.

"I've pulled the wool over Rosemary's eyes so far," she confessed to her husband one night in the privacy of their room, "that is, I think I have, but the boys see through me I am sure, and Blessing will in time. Mr. Sherwood kissed her fondly, and for the thousandth time assured her that she was the most wonderful mother on earth.

"Well, I'm not. It is only an experiment anyway, and you never have the faintest idea what to do with children, being all different and everything, till they are grown up, and it's too late."

"You're not the only one. Think of Eve and on down." "I don't blame Eve for making such a failure. She was young, everything new to her, and Adam no help, but of course, folks now have more resources than she had," replied Mrs. Sherwood.

"Anyway you are wonderfully looked up to now," said Papa. "Tonight when I put Blessing to bed, she refused to say her little prayer, and when I said, 'Say it, darling, and ask Jesus to take care of you,' she said, 'He doesn't need to, I's dot a Mudder'."

It surely was a merry little circle with an occasional interruption of some sort. Most of the diseases known to children had been safely disposed of before Blessing arrived.

She, however, appeared in time to join the rest in an attack of scarlet fever, which she did so promptly and thoroughly that her life hung on a thread for days, and great was the rejoicing when all four children were again about and well.

In emulation of some boy of whom they had read, the boys worked on a doll house for Blessing, while all were convalescent, and by Mama's slipping down to the store for little dolls and silvery cribs and tables, with Rosemary to make tiny covers and window hangings, a beautiful gift for the baby was the result, her third birthday drawing near. No one could suspect the wonderful house had once been a cracker box, when scraps of carpet were tacked down in the upstairs, and a tin stove with a black cook presiding over it put in the kitchen. The children went wild over the success of their efforts, and could hardly wait to give it to the baby.

CHAPTER III.

OTHER PEOPLE'S CHILDREN

"The world has no such flower in any land,
And no such pearl in any gulf or sea,
As any babe on any Mother's knee."

—*Swinburne.*

MRS. SHERWOOD came home one winter day all stirred up. Stopping in the grocery store, Mr. Stebbins, the grocer, told her of a small waif who came in that morning to warm by the fire, barefoot, having had no shoes all winter.

This information was followed by more about a baby girl whose mother was nearly dead from neglect and trouble. "The child is about the age of little Blessing," said Mrs. Sherwood while repeating all this to her husband. "When she was rescued from her drunken father, her little half-starved body was covered with black and blue bruises where he had beaten her."

"Dreadful," murmured Mr. Sherwood. "But really, Minnie, such folks are hard to help; impossible, I might say. She was prob-

ably sent out by her parents to attract a lot of sympathy. Suppose they are loafing at home and living off the proceeds, may be in New York, there's no telling. I'd like to see a child of mine up to that; they are all alike—a trifling set, the children of that sort, off-scourings of the earth as a rule, and I haven't any patience with folks like Stebbins who drag them to the surface all the time, or with these places where they gather them together for effect to support a lot of other triflers, drawing high salaries."

"He didn't drag them, they came themselves, John, and you know very well how selfish we are, especially lately since Blessing came. Why Rosemary and I have made her so many clothes, she can never wear them out, and not one for a poor child. Our little circle has closed in until we don't even know about other children and their troubles, aside from helping them. We ought to wake up."

"Their own folks are the ones who ought to wake up, and look after them, and keep them off the street," said her husband. "No one with any sense would have a child roaming around the country anyway."

"Well, what I want to know is how to get out of this rut, John. You just go round in a circle, and end right where you began."

"Oh, don't worry," and Mr. Sherwood buried his face again in the evening paper. "I happen to know of a carload of clothes and things to say nothing of the money you have given to help the poor around here this winter. I know I came up missing on a lot of my things. You're as bad as the baby about giving, and then you think you don't do anything—funny! You seem to think we can't even love our own children."

"You mix a person up so," and Mama had as Frank had once said, "tears in her voice." "I don't think we can possibly love our children too much—the right kind of love, I mean. Only I think we could love and be interested in other children too, if we only began to, and ours not suffer at all. You know that verse about 'Not what we give, but what we share.' We have never really shared a thing in our lives, and we never worried about it either. Neither one of us was brought up to do it. We just dumped things on folks that we didn't want ourselves, and that they didn't want either lots of times." And Mrs. Sherwood left for the kitchen, glancing back to see Blessing climbing on papa's knee.

"Well, what did the baby think of the doll house?" said Papa coming in the next night from his office. It had been Blessing's birth-

day and was to have been a festive occasion.

"She was perfectly glad," said Paul looking up from the field of battle where his white marbles were ranged as enemies against the "glassies." "She clapped her hands and looked sweet, and kissed us and went to playing."

"Good," said Papa, starting out on a hunt for Blessing and her present; finding both, he had to see all over again each chair and table and doll, and listen to the story from Rosemary of how "S'prised" the little one was.

"Mrs. Jones has brought her little girl along, Rosemary," said Mama two days afterward, "and I want you to try and amuse her awhile."

Mrs. Jones was the laundress. Her little girl had bright red hair and freckles galore and a green dress. Rosemary was glad to help this way with the washing, and took Lucinda in to see the doll house and its owner. Lucinda was so surprised that her freckles glowed with excitement and she forgot to say "ma'am" to Rosemary and Blessing each time she spoke as her Mother had told her to do.

"Yike 'em, dirl," asked Blessing solemnly after the children had played awhile. Lucinda stammered an embarrassed "Yes."

"Me dive 'oo some, dirl. Me dive 'oo



"Me dive 'oo some, dirl. Me dive 'oo dese."

dese," and Blessing seized a large handful of furniture and the mother doll with an infant in its silvery crib and pressed them into the child's hand. Lucinda's eyes grew round with delight.

"Now baby, what did you do that for," and Mama spoke rather sharply, coming from the laundry in whose damp precincts Lucinda had appeared to show her mother her presents, so blissfully unconscious of anything out of the way that Mrs. Sherwood was struck dumb.

"Me has too muts babies and too muts tsairs and too muts tables and sins," said the birdlike voice. "Poor 'ittle dirls hasn't dot tsairs and tables an' me dive 'em some."

"Mercy on us," groaned Mrs. Sherwood, "the child has actually given away the cunning set that I—well, never mind!" And so little by little the doll house faded away until only the walls and a few small pictures remained as a reminder of former glories.

CHAPTER IV.

TO VISIT THE QUEEN

"Rock-a-by baby, your cradle is green,
Papa's a nobleman, mama's a queen;
Frank is a drummer who drums for the king,
And Blessing's a lady who wears a gold ring."

MORE, more," begged Blessing as Rosemary was rocking her to sleep one afternoon in early spring. "Put Rosemary and Paul in 'e song." "Can't darling, don't know how," replied big sister. "More keen (queen) Bessed wants more keen!" So Rosemary sang:

"Pussy cat, pussy cat, where have you been?"

"I've been to London to visit the queen."

"Pussy cat, pussy cat, what gave she you?"

"She gave me a diamond as big as my shoe."

Mixing up the song somewhat, but baby didn't care. "Bid as Bessed's shoe?" "Yes—now go to sleep."

The Sherwoods were old-fashioned in many or most particulars. "Enough rules for health and not too many for love and comfort," was the first and great commandment

in this home, and so each child in turn had been comfortably rocked if there was time and anyone wished to do so.

Blessing closed her eyes and soon dropped off to sleep, but before the sand man had quite completed the job, a definite thought was fixed in her little brain. She would like to go to London, wherever or whatever that was and to visit the queen. She did not know what a queen was, but as the pussy cat went to see her, she thought it might be a lady with a cow so that the kitty could have plenty of nice milk. As to the diamond, that was a minor matter. At any rate when she waked up she would go there and find out; so when her nap was over and Blessing was attired in her new red dress for the afternoon the thought was still there.

Frank and Paul, rushing in from school like a whirlwind, began fussing as usual over their belongings. To divert their minds and give them occupation, Rosemary left Blessing in their care while she went to find her Mother in another part of the house.

Afterward the boys confessed that the baby put on her little bonnet, took rag Priscilla and a picture book in her arms and said with dignity, "Me do away if boys carl" (quarrel) and walked out of the door. Papa, just home



"Afterward the boys confessed that the baby put on her bonnet . . . and walked out of the door."

from the city was resting in the hammock, Maggie, the maid, was flirting at the kitchen door with the grocer's boy, and Rosemary and Mama upstairs, all of them unconscious that the little maid had set sail to visit the queen.

Rosemary soon came back happily humming a tune, but stopped short in alarm when she discovered the door and gate open, the boys still wrangling and Blessing not visible anywhere.

Mrs. Sherwood and Maggie were called in by Papa, who, greatly excited, soundly spanked each boy to properly start proceedings. Maggie, wringing her hands, rushed from house to house to obtain help in searching for the precious baby, for all the neighbors knew her and her loss was a common sorrow.

One of them, Mrs. Davis, had seen her pattering off down the walk and supposed one of the family was near since she was always so closely guarded. "I called and asked her where she was going," said that lady almost in tears; "she laughed and said something I couldn't understand, about kitty and keen and went on, but I surely thought one of the children was with her."

"You're not to blame," said Mr. Sherwood

heartily, "the rest of us should have watched her and never let her get started, but she'll be found alright."

Papa, however, was wrong for once at least. The large force doubled and trebled, searching every nook and corner of the village and surrounding country but in vain, and the home that in the morning had been so happy was wrecked and ruined when the sun went down. The machinery had stopped and only one baby hand could set it in motion again. The afternoon and long night wore by and still the child was not found.

O! the agony of suspense! The hell of uncertainty! As Mrs. Sherwood walked the floor in her anguish while Rosemary (dry-eyed but heart-broken), tried to cheer and comfort her, the mother's only cry was of this, the horror of it all.

"Oh, if my precious baby were only dead! Only dead! But maybe stolen or drowned or suffering! The little sheltered darling! Oh, God in heaven have mercy, and send tidings of her!"

But as the day dragged by (how can it be written), little Blessing was gone. Gone completely, leaving no trace behind her. Disappeared apparently off the face of the earth.

There were the toys in the nursery as she

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had left them, the horses and little cotton dogs and Teddy bears, the rooster that walked and clapped its wings and crowed when you wound it, the lion that hopped and Rosemary's six dolls in the corner, but no baby to play with them. As day after day passed the nursery door was locked, never to be opened unless the child came home. All of the distracted father's income and bank account was expended on detective work, men seeking the baby all over the broad land, all of his own time that he could safely spare from the bedside of his prostrated wife also given to the search, but in vain.



CHAPTER V.

PATRICIA HAS AN IDEA

"And all my Mother came into mine eyes,
And gave me up to tears."

—*Shakespeare.*

TO speak correctly, Blessing had not set sail at all, but was traveling cheerfully along toward New York some fifty miles distant from Vinton, where the Sherwoods resided. Following a man with a valise (whom she thought seemed to be going to visit the queen), she reached the station only a few blocks distant from the Sherwood home, just as the train pulled in. Seeing him go up some steps Blessing followed, unnoticed by the station agent, and assisted by the porter who thought she belonged to the gentleman. To her surprise the little house with red plush seats and pretty windows began to move (naturally enough, it being the New York limited), and Blessing trotted down the aisle looking for the "keen" as happy and bright as a ray of sunshine.

Mrs. Kate Flynn was returning to New

York from a visit to the old homestead of two rooms in the factory town of Millville, where she had succeeded in overwhelming her former co-workers in the factory with the sight of her prosperity as evinced by outward decoration.

Blessing's attention was thus attracted by the exhibit and she stopped to admire, remarking with baby laughter in baby language upon the "pitty fedders on 'e 'adies hat," the "pitty wings on 'e 'adies finders," and "the pitty wed on 'e 'adies face," this latter calling forth smiles from the passengers and enraging Mrs. Flynn, whose cabaret name was Patricia Garnette.

Mrs. Flynn in a life of twenty-eight years had met with success in four points. She had graduated from the factory into married life, had succeeded in divorcing her husband, had gone to New York to live and lastly was the proud possessor of a "job" in a cabaret, singing shady popular songs in a thin little voice while dancing, although fearing dismissal each day on account of her steadily failing health and poor work.

Patricia, as she now styled herself, hated all children and tried to encourage the baby to move on. Blessing, however, was fascinated by the display and climbing up on the seat by the lady, sat down, placed Priscilla



"She sang loud and lustily."

carefully by her side and began singing out of her book, giving sidelong glances meanwhile at the lady's face and beautiful attire having never in her quiet life in the little town of Vinton seen anything of the sort.

She sang loud and lustily (thus she was engaged when her mother was weeping, having discovered her loss), causing Kate to look at her, struck with an idea, an unusual occurrence for her.

Blessing's little book which she had picked up as she started, contained the music as well as the words of the old Mother Goose rhymes, and beginning at the first page the child gave quite a concert upon seeing the interested audience in the adjoining seats. From Four and Twenty Blackbirds, Bo Beep, Jack and Jill and Three Blind Mice, she went on straight through to Baa, Baa, Black Sheep, singing from the pictures as she could not read, winding up with "Wock a by baby on the twee top," at which point she lay down the book and rocked back and forth with rag Priscilla, as Rosemary and Mama rocked her precious self. The rocking made her think and she woke up, suddenly realizing that she was among strangers and began to cry.

"Good Lord, kid, shut up," said Kate, "where's your mother?" "Me wants my

Mudder, me wants my Wosemary," and the sobbing grew louder, causing Kate at length to take the child the full length of the long train, on a vigorous hunt for the child's parents. No one, however, had ever seen or heard of her, all were listless so far as she was concerned and engaged in gathering up their belongings preparatory to arriving in New York, so when Patricia Garnette took the child's hand and led her forth to enter a new chapter in her little life, no one noticed or cared.

"My little niece," she informed the landlady of the cheap boarding house near the Bowery, which she called home. "My sister, she died a year ago and this here Bessie is too much for mother—goin' to keep her here awhile and let her sing down at the "Hy Jinks," this being the place where Patricia was singing, none too sure of her job.

"Sing, you bet your life! I spent all the time I was on my vacation a-teaching her them songs so as to train her to help me."

"Come to Auntie, darlin'," (for through petting and coaxing alone would she sing) and because Blessing had never known an aunt the child called her Auntie as easily as any other name, begging for "Mudder," and always hearing, "Yes, Asthore, to you're Mudder we'll go tomorrow if ye sings for me

good tonight." To explain this mother search to the landlady, Kate said, "Ye see she's huntin', huntin' ever since her mother, rest her soul, died, and we humors her by sayin' found she will be soon. This Rosie she's always talkin' of? Why that's the sister that is older an' stayin' with my mother. She misses her of course."

Since babies so soon forget and are so easily diverted, Blessing soon settled down to her own daily task of singing little songs to queer carousing people; thriving on impossible fare, winning friends in the cheap boarding house and hardly recognizable in the funny cheap costumes gotten up by Patricia. Always hoping, looking and often crying for Mudder, consoled by Kate's promises of finding her tomorrow, and now and then asking questions about the "keen" which, not understanding, no one could answer.

The woman made no effort to find her parents, trusting to the ready Irish wit to excuse herself if ever found out, and much safer in the heart of New York City than any place else. In her way she was good to Blessing, sleeping with her and feeling her own sins press upon her as the little arms twined around her neck in the night showing her what she had missed.

CHAPTER VI.

FROM A NEW VIEWPOINT

"Oh, to come home once more when the dusk is
falling,
To see the nursery lighted and the children's
table spread;
'Mother! Mother! Mother!' the eager voices calling,
The baby was so sleepy that she had to go to
bed!"

—*Unknown.*

CAN'T you try and brace up, darling?" said Mr. Sherwod to the listless invalid one day. "You ought to think of the rest of us, dearest, even if—" and here his tears mingled with hers and for a time nothing was said. Rosemary, seated at the head of the bed, gently stroked the mother's brown hair, where here and there a silver thread was beginning to show of late.

"I do try, John dear, indeed you don't know how hard I try, but how can I live? It is killing me, and I can't help it. There's only one medicine that will cure my trouble," and the faint voice again dissolved in tears.

And indeed it seemed for a month that Mr. Sherwood was destined to know sorrow on sorrow, for nothing could reach such a malady, and even Rosemary's tender care had no effect.

"Well sir," and Dr. Adams coughed vigorously when consulted for the fiftieth time, "You must take her traveling. New sights, new scenes may help a little, but I don't know, I don't know," and the rough voice shook. "In bed all the time? Well, pick her right up and start. Yes, it is the only hope. Yes, Rosemary had better go along, but leave the boys behind. They would worry a stone monument into nervous prostration.

Mrs. Davis, who had seen Blessing last, volunteered to take the boys as a just penance for her neglect in allowing the baby to go on when she met her, and promised not to sleep day or night unless the boys were under lock and key or chained up, or words to that effect, and so the sad house was locked and the lonely trio departed. But day and night one thought only possessed the three, often unspoken when their hearts were fullest: "Blessing, darling Blessing!"

As for Rosemary, she alone had one sorrow of her own to bear, for the baby had slept with her always and not even the father

and mother knew how she missed the dear arms around her neck at night and the dear head on her shoulder. Men do not think of some of these things, and the mother's grief was so great that this burden was poor Rosemary's to carry alone, the lonely nights her greatest sorrow.

LETTER FROM MR. SHERWOOD TO DR. ADAMS

"Yes, I see a slight change in her, a faint interest in life, or rather to speak exactly, some interest in a little child we saw on the platform as we passed through a small station. It was a homely youngster, Doctor, but so poor and neglected and hungry looking, we both felt sorry for it. Suppose that—but to go on: Rosemary stepped out and gave it part of the lunch we had with us and you should have seen it. It reminded me of a young wolf. Whose child was it, I wonder? Maybe someone is seeking it now!"

Dr. Adams wiped his glasses. "Sherwood is going to come out all right," he said. "Prejudiced and one-sided—too much of an aristocrat and not sympathetic except to his own family, but with a big heart if it could have a chance. Sometimes a hard frost does

wonders and this one may work a miracle. Stranger things have happened."

LETTER FROM FRANK TO HIS MOTHER

"Mama, dearest, Paul and i are Going to be good and we are sorry we have been acting so bad. Paul says he loves you very mutch and he is Sorry he made Blessing run away. i think you are verry dear, and i Remember how Papa told me he stood up on a horse once, when it was Running. i will try and Do the same, so goodbye. Paul is sorey he is stingy, and so am i, for i want his nife.

Your loving,
Frank."

This letter aroused the mother. What were the boys doing? Were they riding wild horses daily? What if one more chapter should be added to the book of trouble! Three months of travel had done very little in the way of improving Mrs. Sherwood's condition. Search was still being carried on all over the country, and daily reports of failure came in. As the sorrow and its certainty grew and grew upon them, an idea was one day timidly broached by Mr. Sherwood

when his wife suggested that they would really have to stop traveling and go home; that although they had paid the boys' board regularly yet money could never compensate Mrs. Davis for her anxiety and trouble in caring for them.

"Well yes, dear, I suppose we must go back to the dark house sometime and I've been thinking maybe you might for my sake (look at it that way, Minnie), let me hunt up a little girl the age of Blessing and take her back with us. No, don't cry, dear. Of course, no one could ever take her place, but when we were in New York City I visited some orphanages and in Cincinnati the Children's Home, and I tell you my views have changed, thinking of Blessing."

And it came out at last, that Mr. Sherwood had not only visited homes and temporary shelters for children, but had helped little waifs with money and clothing many times since leaving home, all on Blessing's account. In short, as Dr. Adams said, the hard frost was doing its work and the burr was beginning to open. And when it did open what a splendid character inside! Indeed, it was Mrs. Sherwood who fell behind when it came to the question of taking anyone in Blessing's place. The mother heart was different, and

it was only her deep love for childhood itself that ever made her give a half-hearted consent. But Rosemary, gentle and unselfish, always, rebelled. She had not the years nor the deep experiences of the best in life which come only with years, and her heart was sore.

"How can I do it Mama, dearest?" she wept. "My sweetest baby sister! She loved me so! Every night she would say "Me 'oves 'oo," when she would wake up and put her little arms round my neck. I never could stand it. I believe I should just hate anyone taking her place and playing with her things and all."

"You wouldn't need to have her with you much, dearest," and Mama stroked the dark head caressingly. "I know just how you feel for I feel that way at times myself, but Papa is so anxious and we have to face it sometime."

But Rosemary still refused to consent to what seemed an impossible thing to endure. One day later, as she sat quietly thinking and grieving, she seemed to see the lost baby again seated on the floor by the doll house giving her toys away to Lucinda, and saying in her sweet little voice that she had too many of them and wanted to share her treasures with the poorer child, and then it dawned on

Rosemary's young soul what little Blessing would say now. If she could speak would it not be the wish of the liberal little child to give the best legacy, her home, to some needy and unfortunate baby? Rosemary's heart said "yes," and although reluctantly, her lips gave their assent.

"I'll try, Mama, truly I will. I won't hate her, but I can't promise to love her. I'll just stand her," and with this the mother had to be satisfied for no more would Rosemary yield.

A few days later the search was begun afresh, this time for a child of misfortune. To all such their hearts were tender, but we who love our own darlings cannot blame them if they were apparently over careful and anxious about it. A week, two weeks, three weeks went by, and still they traveled and looked. They visited institutions for their care. They followed dozens of them home on the streets, but still found no one who seemed a possible child to love and keep, no one in the least resembling the precious lost baby.

The process of visiting these homes for homeless waifs, where children might be had for adoption was a fruitful one, even though fruitless so far as finding the right kind of

a child. Mr. Sherwood found his interest really awakened, not only in the children themselves, but in their temporary parents and guardians. He sat in the office of the superintendent of one of the homes one morning for two hours, and heard the tales of sorrow, saw the starved and neglected and abused children brought in and found out that he himself would prefer any other occupation rather than to be the receptacle of the woes of the universe. He found his heart warming and his respect increasing for these men who had turned their backs on riches and preferment, for the good they might do unto the "least of these," and he confessed to his wife his injustice in judging them without knowing the real facts; and thus, through the loss of little Blessing was unconsciously growing into a fuller and more complete manhood.

CHAPTER VII.

SHIPS THAT PASS IN THE NIGHT

"A child's first steps are toward his Mother; the rest are too often away from her."

—*Bannister.*

TWICE did the voyagers almost cast anchor in the same port as the darling for whom they sought. First, when starting on the trip, and spending a few days in New York in order to put in motion new plans of search for the baby. No place is so safe as a great city if one wishes to hide, and no one more secure than Kate Flynn to openly take this child of love and longing back and forward to the cafe, piecing out her own pitifully deficient work by the child's sweet songs and winsome ways. A little winding street car, relic of early days, upon which she rode with the child in secure privacy passed almost by the door of the Hy Jinks cafe. At any rate being almost desperate this was her one chance of holding her "job." "Maybe your Mama will be there, darlin'," Kate would say and would always whisper to Bless-

ing, "Sing for Mudder so if she comes in, she'll find you."

Mr. Sherwood, meeting by accident a friend of school days, now a florid traveling salesman, Jim Berger, who always took in the sights, was greeted with hearty words and a cordial invitation to accompany him to the Hy Jinks cafe to dinner. "I hear that the singer there has her little niece, a child of three with her, singing, and they say it is great—Mother Goose rhymes, rag doll and that stuff."

This invitation followed by profuse apologies when informed of the Sherwood's great loss. "I wouldn't go anyway Berger, even if we were not in such trouble. Anyone of that class exploiting a child for gain should not be encouraged," said Mr. Sherwood in a coldly critical tone.

A month or so later, while on their long trip, meeting the same friend farther West, Mr. Berger said—"By George, Sherwood, you'll never know what you missed. That kid was the cutest thing you ever saw, and I just dropped in at the right time for it was the last night."

"How was that," responded Mr. Sherwood.

The man chuckled reminiscently. "Well,

you see the youngster was tired and sleepy. Her aunt had been making her sing all afternoon and evening. It was twelve o'clock when I got there and a bunch of fellows had dropped in to hear her. Old Lyle and some chorus girls and a few other men whose wives were away. I wasn't near enough to see just what happened, but the fellows said that the kid tried to rock and sing and nearly went to sleep, and then toddled over to her aunt and climbed up in her lap, put her head on her shoulder and reeled off something about wanting to say her prayer and go to bed and suggested that all these ladies (pointing at the chorus girls who still had their war paint on), also wished to say their prayers and go to bed. The boys said the girls gasped and looked daggers. You ought to have seen them scatter, saying they didn't come there to be insulted. I heard them talking as they went out (guess a few of the men went home to take a look at their own children), and Patricia was fired."

"Wish I had gone to see her," Mr. Sherwood replied.

"Well, I went up to get a drink afterward," said his acquaintance, "and the bartender told me he was glad to get rid of them for his sales had dropped off forty per cent

since the child began singing. Said they would flock in and stand and listen, and then just ooze away without even a gingerale. The proprietor said he wasn't running a Wednesday night prayer-meeting or didn't start out to at least."

The second time, when the large and small barques passed almost within hailing distance, was in San Francisco some five months after Blessing's disappearance as the Sherwood's were leaving for a tour of Southern California, having about decided to take some child home in her place.

Mr. Sherwood came into the room at the hotel, removed his hat, kissed his wife, and sat down saying, "Well, this has been an expensive morning. Cost me just two hundred and fifty dollars to ask a question." "What question?" responded his wife quickly, thinking of the things she could do with that amount if she could ever get hold of it all at once. "I said to the clerk, 'who is that bright looking fellow?'"

"Who was he? Do go on," and Mrs. Sherwood showed the first real interest in anything since her trouble.

"The clerk knows him well. He has been out here months trying to work out a patent and his money gave out just as he had it com-

pleted. You know how California is. People flock here by the wholesale and can't find work, or live on the climate and scenery, get discouraged and lots of them leave by the only route that carries them free, suicide."

"Yes," assented his wife, with a new feeling that others had trouble beside herself.

"Well," he went on, "I talked to the boy for he wasn't over twenty-four or so. Found that he had tried everywhere to borrow the money to finish up and make some money out of his patent, and couldn't find a cent. Said he was desperate and contemplating ending it all last night, but had started out to make one more effort to borrow the money this morning."

"I wondered what happened to make him more hopeful and willing to try again? He told me. He said he was staying at a cheap place down by the ferry and a queer sort of woman blew in with a little niece of hers. Sort of third rate vaudeville and cabaret singer, but the child was lovely, didn't resemble her at all. It seems he sat after dinner debating how he had better finish up, the bay, gas or poison, and the child came up and spoke to him."

"What did she say?"

She said, "Man, does 'oo feel bad tause-

'oo tan't find 'oo's Mudder? 'Oo'll find 'oo's Mudder if 'oo teeps on 'ookin'!" He said he straightened up and thought that he had not considered his dear old mother at all, how it would break her heart to hear her boy was a suicide, and tried again."

"I don't wonder you let him have the money," said Mrs. Sherwood.

"He was deeply grateful to me, but most of all to that child. The clerk had told him of our loss and that we were talking of finding a child to take home. He wanted me to come over and see this one. Said this aunt told him her mother died sometime ago. The child has been talking of finding her ever since, and the woman seeming so discouraged and out of work he thought maybe she would let us have her. But I told him I was looking for a child of unquestionable parentage, and didn't go. She is evidently of bad stock. I think it is the same crew we heard of in New York City at that cafe." "That was very sweet though, dear!" Mr. Sherwood looked up to see tears in his wife's eyes.

"Sounds so much like the things our baby used to say. Can't we go and see her?"

"Well, we might tomorrow morning if you feel able." But in the morning a tiresome trip to the number given by the young man

Mr. Sherwood had befriended, resulted in being informed that the woman and child had left.

"Took the train East last night," said the landlady. "No, I don't know where. Guess she didn't know, either, poor sick thing." And so, the Sherwoods went south while Kate and her little companion were painfully journeying eastward, the woman defraying the expenses by stopping at several towns and having the child sing at any convenient cafe where it would be allowed, until the Middle West was reached. And once more the waters rolled between.

CHAPTER VIII.

A ROSE FOR THE QUEEN

"A little Motherless Maid! What is more pitiful in the eyes of Men and of Angels?"

—*Hillmer.*

WHERE is no need of tracing step by step the sad story from this point, for when Kate Flynn's health began to break, from her course of life before finding the child, a few weeks only sufficed to transform her into the ghost of her former self. Telling so often the story she had invented about Blessing, she had come to the point where she almost believed it herself. From hating children, she had grown to love this one, and small wonder. Her whole life had been changed and was now regulated according to what the child would say and do. Those who had known wild Kate some four years back, would certainly not know her now, looking forward to putting Blessing to bed, and listening to her childish prattle. It seemed that conscience spoke at times through the child as she asked Kate question after ques-

tion as to her own "little dirls," where they were, what they said and did and what their names were, until many a wakeful night was the result. As Kate grew steadily weaker, unable to work or to do for the child, no avenue of help and hope opened save one.

In the Middle West, whither they had wandered, some freak of fortune threw in their way another factory girl whom Kate had known in bygone days.

Herself easily drifting, tired of hard work, she was unaffectedly glad to see Kate, taking her and the child to what she called home after finding how ill and poor the woman was. Here she cared for her in memory of the old days, although giving scant welcome to the child.

When, some days afterward, Kate suddenly died (holding Blessing's two chubby hands for lack of older ministration, as she stepped forth into the vast unknown), this woman gave her decent burial, making a solemn promise (which she soon forgot) to try and find Blessing's parents.

She also wondered what had so changed Kate, and what she meant by talking the way she did of not being afraid to die, but only afraid to leave the baby. For so had baby hands worked a miracle.



Then Blessing (wondering why Auntie slept so long), unwanted, a monument of reproach to those around her, was neglected and abused until her long-suffering guardian angel fluttered a little nearer and took her by the hand.

By slow stages, the Sherwoods were traveling east, two months later, hopeless of ever finding their own child, as daily reports still came in from detectives over the country, but trying hard to rise above their grief in searching for a little girl to take her place. When the little party alighted at the Union Station in Denver, preparatory to looking through an institution there, the mother-heart almost burst with fresh grief.

"Let's not try to do it, dear," and Mrs. Sherwood laid her hand beseechingly on her husband's arm. "I can't love a child; my heart is broken; I have tried to think I could. I didn't mean to deceive you, dear, but it was my sense of duty all the time, and my wish to help you do what you wanted to for the best,—but my baby! My precious Blessing! Oh! I will give anything, but not her dear place in my heart!"

"Don't give it, dearest," and Mr. Sherwood's voice was very tender; "just share it, as you told me long ago; it was that that set me thinking."

"Oh! I see it now, John! Just to let her share my baby's place, and love and keep on loving Blessing just the same," and the light that came for a moment into the sorrowing face made Mr. Sherwood think of the bygone days, so happy and so far removed.

The place to which the Sherwoods' steps were directed was a rambling brick-and-frame structure, evidently overcrowded but with a large yard and ample playground, whose swings and sand piles were suggestive of good times. There were baby faces at the windows, children in the playground and little babies in the nursery. The lady Superintendent and the Matron met them at the door and cheerfully produced the stock of children at command. There were brown-eyed waifs, and little orphans with blue eyes and flaxen hair, but some way, among them all, there was not one who seemed to fill the bill of requirements. The only child who came near the idea the Sherwoods had in mind was a boy of four, sweet and lovable and needing a home, but still a boy. There were some of the sweetest babies in the world, all too small. There was a boy brought in while they were there, in rags and filth, and speedily transformed into a fine, interesting child by the application of soap and water and new



clothing. Mr. Sherwood shook his head.

"Would you like to see the hospital ward before you go?" inquired the Matron, and so the once more disappointed searchers passed down the long room, looking with sympathy upon the little ones with various defects and afflictions.

"Are these all hopeless?" asked Mr. Sherwood.

"No, sir; many are curable if we could afford the expense. Now, that girl over there in the invalid chair, Nellie her name is (pointing to a plain-looking girl about the age of Rosemary), can be made to walk if someone would spend a thousand dollars or so on her, and there are some other cases. Nell has a wonderful talent for drawing, and I am sure could sing, too, if she were taught. But what is the use?"

"These are the left-overs, you might say. No one wants a cripple," and the Matron sighed. "People are so selfish. They think they are doing such a noble thing, but I take notice no one wants a child with the least defect or that they can really help. They must be beautiful, of fine antecedents, and exactly right." Here memory gave Mr. Sherwood a most unpleasant nudge. The girl's appealing eyes were fixed on them as

they passed. "This one never had a chance of any sort, but she is sweet and bright." Mr. Sherwood caught his wife's eye and a look of complete understanding passed between them.

"Get that child's hat," he said, hurriedly. "If money and love can cure her, here goes, music and drawing thrown in." Mrs. Sherwood and Rosemary kissed the thin cheeks, feeling (though never would they have acknowledged it) a rather selfish joy that (as this girl was so much older) Blessing's place was to be kept sacred. To their surprise, however, the girl gave no answering smile, but drew back and said, "I can't go; don't ask me."

"How funny of her!" remarked the Matron. "She has been crazy to get away."

"I couldn't possibly leave my baby."

"What does she mean?" asked Rosemary.

"There is a child in one of the private hospital rooms, who came in three days ago, and took a violent fancy to Nellie. Our Superintendent rescued her from a doubtful sort of woman in the lower part of the city. The woman had a most ungovernable temper, aside from her general reputation making it impossible to leave a child in her care."

"How dreadful! Did the woman abuse her?" and Mrs. Sherwood's sympathetic face expressed more than words.

"Who were her parents?" This from Mr. Sherwood.

"No one can find out. She had been punished for nothing, I am sure, for she is very sweet, and was badly bruised from the effects of it all. Her little nerves are about wrecked. She screams from fear when left alone or at night. From the first she took kindly to Nellie, and Nellie, being so alone and crippled, worships her."

Who shall deny that right here the listening angel could endure no more, and touched Mr. Sherwood's heart with love, and he uttered (in to him an unknown tongue), "Bring her on, too. By George, Minnie, what's the matter with gathering up a whole family? Who's with the youngster now?" "One of the older children is relieving Nell," responded the Matron. "Her case does not require a trained nurse so much as a cheerful companion. Will you look at her?" "Sure," said Mr. Sherwood.

"The girl is reading to her," said the Matron. "The children are all fond of Hans Andersen's Fairy Tales, and this baby can understand some of it."

Through the slightly opened door the listeners heard the girl's voice and paused a moment on the threshold. She read haltingly but with great feeling:

"There lived once a great Queen, in whose gardens were found the most splendid flowers, in all seasons and from every land in the world. She especially loved roses, and therefore she had the most beautiful varieties of this flower, from the wild hedge rose with its apple-scented leaves, to the splendid Provence rose. . . .

"But care and sorrow dwelt within these walls. The Queen lay upon a sick bed, and the doctors declared that she must die.

"'There is still one thing that could save her,' said one of the wisest among them. 'Bring her the loveliest rose in the world, one which exhibits the purest and brightest love, and if it is brought to her before her eyes close she will not die.'"

Then a voice, faint but thrilling: "Poor keen; me sorry for poor sick keen. If me had a wose me would dive it to her." Here, looking up at the beautiful, frail lady in the door, whose arms were outstretched and whose pale face was lighted and transfigured with joy inexpressible, little Blessing added, "Is 'oo the keen, poor sick 'adie?" Then, as her baby memory rallied to her aid old half-forgotten images, with the low, glad cry of "Mudder!" she sprang into the waiting arms, her quest ended.

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